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Department of
Agriculture

Forest
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Dear Interested Party,

As a stakeholder in issues affecting the Weminuche Wilderness, the San Juan and Rio Grande National Forests would like to notify you of public forums to be held this spring regarding a required registration program for recreational visitors in the Weminuche.

Beginning in 2014, the San Juan and Rio Grande National Forests will require recreationists to register prior to entering the Weminuche Wilderness. Registration will consist of a short two-part form available online, at agency offices and major trailheads. An individual or group leader will fill out the form, deposit one part in a box at the trailhead and keep the other part while in the Wilderness. There will be no fees associated with the program, and it will not impose any additional limits on use.

The primary goal is to collect more specific information on Wilderness use to better monitor recreation trends and gauge the effectiveness of our efforts to slow and/or reverse negative impacts in certain areas. We also hope filling out and carrying a registration tag will help remind visitors they are entering a designated Wilderness. Regulations will be printed on back.

Wilderness areas are set aside by Congress for non-motorized and non-mechanized uses, such as foot travel and pack travel (no motor vehicles or bicycles are allowed). Regulations and laws mandate that public land agencies mitigate negative impacts to designated Wilderness.

Spanning almost half a million acres across the Continental Divide, the Weminuche was originally designated by Congress in 1975 and expanded to its present size by the Colorado Wilderness Bills of 1980 and 1993, making it Colorado's largest designated Wilderness Area. The Wilderness Act of 1964 mandates that Wilderness be managed as: *"unimpaired for future use and enjoyment . . . [with] . . . the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable."*

In 1998, a five-year public process resulted in a National Environmental Policy Act analysis entitled the *San Juan-Rio Grande National Forests Wilderness Management Direction*. This planning document initiated a monitoring program and identified management actions to be taken, when and if monitoring indicated impacts were approaching or exceeding established thresholds.

Over the past 14 years, the agency has gathered information from voluntary sign-in boxes at Wilderness trailheads, and backcountry rangers and volunteers have conducted onsite monitoring across the Weminuche. Monitoring has revealed that adverse impacts from recreational activities are approaching or exceeding these thresholds in some areas. Impacts include high campsite densities, denuded vegetation, damage from firewood collection, soil sterilization from illegal campfires, impact to lakeshores and wetlands, degraded water quality from improper disposal of human waste, overcrowding, and less opportunity for solitude, an important Wilderness value.

Registration programs are common in other Wilderness areas across the West. In the Rockies, the U.S. Forest Service requires registration for the Maroon Bells, Mount Massive and Cloud Peak wilderness



areas, among others. Required registration programs have been shown to improve the agency's ability to monitor use patterns, while better informing visitors on how to reduce their impacts upon natural resources and the experiences of others.

Requiring registration is an action already approved by the 1998 *Wilderness Management Direction*, but implementation details are not yet finalized. That's where we need your help. We invite you to attend one of the public forums below to learn about the project, why it is being put in place, and most importantly, to provide us with suggestions for implementation.

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|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| • Creede Community Center | Tue, Apr 16, 5:30 – 7:30 pm |
| • Durango Recreation Center | Tue, Apr 23, 5:30 – 7:30 pm |
| • Silverton Town Hall | Thu, Apr 25, 5:30 – 7:30 pm |
| • Lake City Coursey Annex | Wed, May 1, 4 – 6 pm |
| • Pagosa Community Center | Thu, May 2, 5:30 – 7:30 pm |
| • Vallecito Community Center | Tue, May 7, 5:30 – 7:30 pm |

In the meantime, we encourage you to read over the accompanying attachment and view the 1998 *Wilderness Management Direction*, monitoring reports and map, and other information posted online at: www.fs.usda.gov/sanjuan under "Quick Links."

Population growth and interest in outdoor activities, combined with marketing by the outdoor tourism industry, all point towards increased future use of the Weminuche. Registration data will indicate where activities are concentrated and whether numbers are increasing to allow us to take action before a tipping point is reached.

We invite your participation in our effort to manage this unique and important Wilderness resource for generations to come. We realize this change will require an adjustment on your part and appreciate your help to make the program work most effectively for the public and the agency. For information on the project, contact Brian White, (970) 385-1246. For information on public forums, contact Ann Bond, San Juan National Forest, (970) 385-1219, or Mike Blakeman, Rio Grande National Forest, (719) 852-5941.

Sincerely,

/s/Mark W. Stiles
MARK W. STILES
Forest Supervisor

/s/ Dan Dallas
DAN DALLAS
Forest Supervisor

cc: Brian White
Crystal L Powell